

Vile 491

Chapter 491 Simbelmyne's Flower

"I call this... the Lazarus Project!"

Eren stopped looking at his spectral screen and looked at the scrolls and notes scribbled by Layla. They were written in a language he didn't quite get. It was partially the same language he was used to. But the meaning behind most of those words didn't make sense to him.

Eren closed his spectral screen and stood from his chair. Then he walked up to the table and pulled up another chair before sitting on it. The notes, maps, and everything Layla had gathered was now clearly visible to him. The young witch was on the other side of the table, standing while tilting her body weight on the table's surface with both her hands.

Layla liked that Eren was trying to give her undivided attention. She took a long breath before continuing.

"Eren, you need to understand this before we proceed further. Both master's and Reen's survival depend on these tasks. I'm not trying to pressurize you. Just reminding you is all. I hope you understand this."

Eren smirked at Layla when he heard this. But he didn't say anything. He started tapping his finger on the table, indicating that she get on with whatever she wanted to say to him.

"Alright, we can now proceed since we got that out of the way."

Layla said and started rummaging through her pile of notes and scrolls before pulling out the scroll she was looking for. She opened it in front of Eren for him to see before commenting.

"I'll start with this. Simbelmyne's Flower. Its trees are only found on the mountain peaks. The flower blooms only when the world's mana seeps into it while imbuing it with a part of its consciousness. Hence, even if you can find the trees, you won't necessarily see a fully bloomed flower."

Eren was handed the scroll regarding Simbelmyne's flower along with its possible locations. All locations were outside the kingdom of Edinburgh. Plus, some of the locations seemed to be in the middle of the Badlands.

Eren had stressed lines on his forehead as he kept on reading the scroll. Layla let him think for a while. Then she proceeded forward.

"Don't worry too much though. We don't have to search aimlessly. I zeroed in on the locations using potions and arrays myself.

What's more? When Simbelmyne's Flower blooms naturally in a wild habitat, it is rare. But some potion-makers dabble into farming these kinds of herbs "in the greenhouse."

Eren kept the scroll on the table and looked at Layla who was smirking at him at the time. He tapped his fingers on the table and commented after pondering for a bit.

"Let me guess. The flower can be bought. But since you did all the research by yourself, I'm guessing it won't be easy to buy."

Layla nodded at Eren's answer before replying.

"That's right. The Simbelmyne's Flower is a transcendent-grade treasure. That means it can use any rank's mana to sustain itself. But the concentration of mana needs to be at crazy levels to induce blooming in the greenhouse.

Maintaining a greenhouse for such a ranking resource is not an easy task. The Extols needed to keep the mana generator arrays functional is not something an individual can sustain for a long time...."

Eren shook his head before interrupting Layla.

"Keep that geek stuff to yourself. Just tell me where we could buy this from and how much does it cost?"

Layla puffed her cheeks when her explanations were interrupted like these. She liked talking about such topics. But apparently, the butcher would rather be back flirting with Altashia if his patience were tested. So she decided to cut short her description of the Simbelmyne's flower and responded.

"*cough. Alright. The Simbelmyne's flower can not be bought casually. At least not these days. It can only be claimed through auction events. And there is high demand.

That's why I also researched the potential natural locations of the flower. Don't worry. I know you are broke. If we are looking for the flower and reach within a certain distance from it, I have a trick that can make us locate it instantly."

Eren narrowed his eyes on Layla and asked in a low voice.

"Don't try to divert from my question. How much are we talking about?"

Layla laughed nervously before raising her hands and showing "One" with her index finger.

"1000 Extols?"

Eren asked dubiously. Subconsciously, he knew Layla wouldn't hesitate for that much money, even if it meant a lot to him. Layla confirmed his suspicions. She shook her head in denial before responding.

"More than 10,000 Extols. And that's a starting bid. Plus, we might need a batch of four Simbelmyne flowers in case of emergency. So that's... hehe... roughly 50,000 Extols."

Eren stopped tapping his fingers on the table when he heard the amount. Stress lines on his forehead increased. Layla tried to cheer him up with her actions and her words.

After walking close to him, she tapped his shoulder as if she were greeting a long-lost friend.

"That's why I said we can look for the flowers naturally. Don't worry. It shouldn't take long for us..."

Eren shook his head in denial before replying.

"No. After reading these notes, I can guess that finding the flower won't be as easy as you are making it out to be. Not to mention exploring the Badlands would be dangerous. I don't like facing dangers if I can avoid them or if they are not worth it.

I'd rather invest my time in something productive. Although I don't have that much money on me now, I'll... I'll just have to find ways to make that amount."

Eren narrowed his eyes and thought of something. He then turned his head to his side facing Layla and asked.

"I'm guessing you also know the place that would auction Simbelmyne's Flower?"

Layla nodded at him and responded.

"Yep. For once, I would want your leecher powers to exceed their normal potential. That's because House Remus is known for auctioning precious herbs that are grown in the greenhouse. And Simbelmyne's Flower is included in their occasional auction events.

You need to make a move on that Dianna girl."

Chapter 492 Shallot's Mirror

"You need to make a move on that Dianna girl."

Layla patted Eren's back with encouragement. The latter looked at her strangely before responding.

"You want me to act like a hoe to get your herbs?"

Layla coughed a bit before responding thoughtfully.

"Semantics. I'd describe it as you just being your usual go-getter. It's not like you are too pure to do something like this. Plus, that Dianna girl seems like she would give you a good deal in exchange for sexual favours."

This time it was Eren who coughed. He looked at Layla once again from head to toe before thinking to himself.

'I often forget this little monster has lived for who knows how long even before I was born. My age and experience in both timelines are akin to zero in front of this loli-looking witch.'

Eren sighed to himself after he had that thought. He then decided to confess.

"I... well... we already have that kind of arrangement in place."

Dianna had agreed to give him a time-element spell called Total Control in exchange for sleeping with her and he had agreed. But Layla wasn't with Eren when he talked with Dianna last time. So she didn't know about the arrangement between the two.

"Your leecher powers have exceeded my expectations.

But that's all right. That's good. Hehe.

I have potions for everything. Do you want performance-enhancing potions? Potions that can give your lady an extra high? Or something to make you grow two di..."

Eren pulled Layla in front of him, made her turn, and pressed his palm against her mouth to shut her up. In that process, Layla was wrapped in his embrace, with her back leaning against his chest while he was still sitting on his chair. She was made to sit on his lap in the end.

Eren continued while keeping his palm pressed against Layla's mouth which was still trying to say something.

"I already have everything covered when it comes to my dick enhancement. Growing two of them won't do me any good. At least for now.

Thanks for letting me know the extent of your potion-making expertise though. I now know who to ask if I want to spice things up in bed."

Eren chuckled before getting serious. He then added.

"The problem lies not in our arrangement. But the rarity of the flower, its price, and Dianna's position in the family.

At most, she can allow us to attend the auction when it happens. She won't be able to give those flowers for free as you are expecting from her even if we convince her to."

Eren released Layla's mouth after he said that. The latter acted like she was out of breath for a moment before responding angrily.

"You... you release me from this position first. I... I just knew it. You already have your eyes on me. But let me tell you..."

"Focus!"

Eren said loudly in Layla's ear while he resumed checking up on the scroll related to Simbelmyne's Flower. The young witch snapped out of her fake innocence and replied.

"That also works. But only if you come up with the money to buy the stuff upfront. And don't forget. It is common for auctions to make you pay more than your expectations."

Layla said while adjusting herself properly on Eren's lap. Using his spectral screen, Eren started reading everything that was open knowledge about the flower found in the army database.

Eren also found the image for Simbelmyne's flower in the army database. It had about 16 petals on the outermost layer. It also features eight inner petals, which surrounded a horn-like protrusion.

The petals of the flowers looked ethereal with their blue hue that would change from dark to light blue before changing back to dark in a cyclic pattern. The horn-like protrusion on the other hand looked solid and as real as it could get. With its dichotomy of real and ethereal, the flower was a rare occurrence in nature.

Eren also found the flower's description under its image. It said that taking a few whiffs of Simbelmyne's flower and turning it into a potion through distillation was able to positively affect a ranker's soul sense. If they had awoken it that is. The soul sense that was enhanced by Simbelmyne's flower would find it easy to harmonize with the world.

Eren wasn't sure what the description meant by harmonizing with the world. But he could guess that Eliza's soul sense was bound to be in disarray if and when she acted against the natural order of the world. The flower was supposed to be her way to curb those negative implications if not outright eliminate them.

"*Sigh. What's next?" FREEWEBNOVEL.COM

Eren sighed before Layla. This was still an easy task for him to manage. He felt that the tasks Layla, and Eliza by proxy had for him were only liable to get more difficult as he worked through the list.

Layla also turned serious. She stretched her arm and fetched another scroll that was lying on the other side of the table and opened it in front of Eren and her before continuing.

"Next we need this. Shallot's Mirror. This is also a transcendent-grade treasure. I'll tell you what it does so that you don't have to search for it separately.

It is a space-element artefact that deals in souls. It can house a soul in an isolated space inside it without the soul facing mutation, dispersion, or any other adverse effects after leaving the natal body.

This is also one of the most critical things we need in our project."

Layla said while pointing her finger over the diagram of the artefact. Eren saw that Shallot's Mirror was indeed a mirror that had an intricate pattern made out of metal-like elements serving as its frame. The mirror was oval. But the surface of the mirror had a black hue and it didn't reflect anything.

Eren also read the description under the image by Layla. Since it was written in a language he could understand this time, he could read it. It said the same thing Layla had said along with how to use it.

Chapter 493 Soul Seed Insertion Array

"You haven't mentioned the possible places we could find the mirror at. That means..."

Eren didn't have to complete his sentence. Layla did it for him.

"Yes. it's already in possession of a family. I don't think I can help you in any way in getting that mirror from its owners. You need to figure out how to get the stuff on your own."

Eren nodded aimlessly before adding on.

"We can forget about asking for the mirror upfront. First, anyone who owns a transcendent-grade treasure would not part with it willingly. Even if they could, they would ask for an exorbitant price. Something I'm not willing to pay.

Where is this mirror? And who is the current owner of the artefact?"

Eren asked while reading the scroll. He soon got the answer he was looking for without Layla having to say anything.

"House of Lancelot located in the city of Lancelot.

Fuck!

Are there any alternatives to this artefact?"

Eren gasped when he read the artefact was now owned by the house of Lancelot. It was a famous artefact-making house. It was also known for running a state-of-the-art weapon smithy and an elite guild.

The house of Lancelot only catered to high-ranking entities. The guild run by the house would only accept or issue high ranking missions. Therefore, it had a very niche clientele and association with other rankers' organizations.

Moreover, the house had devised an ingenious scheme to keep powerful rankers working under its banner.

The house would offer discounts for custom orders placed by C-rank rankers and above. Provided they serve the house for a certain period through their guild or undertake the tasks that it tells them to do. The discount would be based on the duration of service or the severity of the task. Of course, since it only dealt with high-ranking entities, the service they needed to provide wasn't anything demeaning.

For the most part, the Lancelot guild ran like any other guild. However, it had a lack of low ranking missions that were usually carried out by any normal guild.

Furthermore, the house of Lancelot always played fair and offered the rankers a fair deal in exchange for the efforts they put in. If any ranker performed way beyond what was expected of them, they would be awarded cutting-edge weapon artefacts that wouldn't pale in comparison with army-issue items.

As a result, a lot of rankers served happily under their banner. Messing with them was akin to painting a bull's eye on your back that would not be missed by high-ranking entities.

"Are there any alternatives to this artefact?"

The butcher asked after picturing the trouble that could potentially ensue from trying to obtain the artefact by any means. He'd rather try his luck finding a Simbelmyne flower in the Badlands than this almost sureshot way to commit suicide. But alas, Layla's answer was only going to disappoint him.

"Eren, there are indeed other ways to achieve the same effects as the mirror can produce. But they are either too high ranked for you to perform or the items they require are even more difficult to find. There is also an array method. But neither you nor I have the expertise or resources to construct something of that calibre.

Obtaining Shallot's Mirror is something you have a chance to achieve no matter how difficult it looks. And to be precise, all the other options I've listed also take this thing into account. Why do you think I took this long to come up with this project?"

Layla said while folding her hands under her non-existent bosoms, leaving Eren speechless. He grunted and used some foul words randomly to vent his frustration before speaking up.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuckity fuck!

Damn it. I'll... I'll need to come up with a plan for this."

Eren said in a voice that was devoid of confidence. He then exhaled his smoke. Layla knew that she would become the primary target of passive smoking if she stayed in the same position, so she quickly rose from her position and straightened her dress before commenting.

"I'm sure you can come up with ways to achieve these two things just fine, Eren. You just need to put your half-blood powers to proper use, is all. Master Eliza counted on your powers more than she counted on you when she relayed these tasks."

Layla said and coughed a bit. Eren knew she was hesitating to state the task that was next on her list. So he sighed and spoke up.

"Spit it out." UPDATE FROM FREEWEBNOVEL.COM.

Layla smiled as if she was guilty of something and continued.

"Hehe! You might not like it. But it is what it is.

Shallot's Mirror is not the only thing we want from house Lancelot. Its weapon smithy contains the Soul Seed Insertion array. They use it to insert beastly consciousness into weapons, making them either high-grade weapons or transcendental grade weapons that grow with their rankers.

That array is the reason behind House Lancelot's success in weapon manufacturing. They breathe life into their weapons after all. I think that guy Rodrick's weapon was also made by them.

We will also need the array's layout for our project. I can modify it to suit our needs if and when we get our hands on it."

Layla said after unfolding the next scroll in front of Eren. Then she looked at him sneakily to observe his expressions. Surprisingly, his face was calm and collected.

"You stopped caring?"

Layla asked with a puzzled expression. Eren shook his head and took a long drag out of his smoke before responding.

"It's not that.

I think it's better for us that the array belongs to the House Lancelot. Saves us some time and trouble looking for it in someone else's house.

Whether I use the tip of my dick or dip it all the way in doesn't matter if I have to "lance" the Lancelots anyway. I might as well rob them of all of the things I can get from them."

In one breath, Eren released his smoke. Layla pursed her lips and twitched her nose after hearing Eren's crass way of putting his point of view across. After that, she pressed her palms against her mouth to contain her laughter. The pun took a while to kick in.

"Hehehehe! That's right. Whether you push it in all the way or... cough cough cough. I mean, yes. It saves us time."

Chapter 494 Astral Projection Potion

"Hehehehe! That's right. Whether you push it in all the way or... cough cough cough. I mean, yes. It saves us time."

Layla said and straightened her dress for no reason. She then hurriedly picked up another scroll and spread it in front of Eren. The latter kept his smoke between his lips and picked up the scroll with both hands.

Layla continued speaking as the butcher kept on reading the content through the smoke.

"The next thing we need is an Astral Projection potion. I don't have to say this at this point. But I'll say it anyway. This one's also a transcendent-grade potion.

There are a couple of good points in regards to obtaining this potion. First, I can make it just fine if I have all the necessary ingredients. Second, most of the ingredients used in the potion are relatively cheap and easy to obtain. There are only a few herbs that are difficult to find or expensive.

Additionally, it is produced in sufficient quantities by many famous potioners of your time. It is a somewhat common potion among high-ranked entities after all. Some potion makers have become rich concocting this potion. So it shouldn't be too challenging to find either."

Layla said and started pacing around the house in front of the work desk. She adjusted her specs and scratched her nose before continuing.

"As for the usage of the potion. The potion is used for detaching the ranker's soul from their mortal body so that they can experience a deeper state of epiphany.

We know that the state of epiphany occurs less frequently as rankers age and progress forward in their journey. The more you age or the higher your rank, the less likely you are to experience that state. This holds true for most rankers."

Eren thought of interrupting the young witch because she had gotten into the zone of explaining things. Her zone was more for herself than for her listeners. The butcher thought that this was her way of dealing with the stress just like he used his smoke to relieve some pressure off of his mind.

So he sighed and let her continue.

"This is the reason Astral Projection Potion is famous among high-ranked entities. To induce Epiphany, they lock themselves in an array-induced environment and consume potions that could help them achieve it.

They use the Astral Projection potion at the end just when they feel they are about to slip into the state of epiphany. As a result, their souls leave their bodies temporarily when they experience that ethereal state, enabling them to reap greater rewards than they possibly can.

This potion is especially famous among high-ranking elves. They also use this potion before starting their elven ale process to get better attuned with the way of their elements."

Eren thought of Lensa and her grandfather-like figure Dan Karran when the effects of the potion were explained by Layla. He had heard that old monster speak extensively about the way of the elements and the state of epiphany. Plus, he had heard that the old elf was a recluse and would often lock himself somewhere.

'That cunning elf must be using this Astral Projection drug. His erratic behaviour and the addiction he seemed to have towards the state of epiphany suggest he might be a frequent user of the potion. He might also be overdosing on it in fact.'

Eren thought and made a note of Dan Karran's potential relation to the potion. By this time, Layla had spoken some more geeky stuff about the potion that Eren considered unimportant. Soon after, she concluded her explanation.

"In the end, I can say with certainty that finding the ingredients and concocting the potion ourselves would still be a cheaper option. I've listed the ingredients as well as the price difference between the two ways of obtaining the potion."

Eren kept on reading the ingredients listed by Layla as she spoke about the potion. She had also written down a rough recipe of the potion along with ways to change the process in case any anomaly occurs.

The ingredients ranged from Ranks F to S. Thankfully, the young witch had also written down lower-ranked variants for the high-ranked herbs while adjusting the portions and recipe accordingly.

This was Eren's first time seeing even a rough layout of the transcendent-grade potion. He had to admit that Layla had left no stone unturned when it came to potioning details. Even after seeing it for the first time, Eren could understand half of what she had written. That was a lot for him.

"You spoke about the good news. Tell me the terrible one."

Layla gave him an awkward smile. She re-adjusted her eyeglasses before speaking up.

"The ingredients are relatively easy to find. The concoction is where things get a bit complex. First of all, I'll need a special array made for the concoction process. Then, I'll need a unique set of equipment that is etched with ether-element runes..."

This time Eren didn't wait for Layla to finish her explanation. He cut her off with his next words.

"Don't worry about the potion-making process. Don't worry about the concoction at all. We will try getting the potion ourselves."

Layla was impressed that a miser like Eren was prioritizing getting the potion in such a manner. But she started having doubts. So she thought it was better if she voiced them.

"You want to pay for the potion as well?"

Eren chuckled and released another cloud of smoke from his mouth before responding.

"Hahaha! If things work out as per my plan, we will get that stuff for free."

Eren dropped the scroll that described the potion on the desk. He already had a lot of information in his head. He could see that Layla had put a lot of effort into coming up with the Lazarus Project. It was as detailed as it was grand.

Having gone over the project's details, the butcher was starting to have a mini project of his own.

Chapter 495 New Vessel

"Is there anything else?"

Eren asked after dropping the Astral Projection Potion's scroll on the table. Layla looked at his behaviour and looked at his smoke with keen interest. The butcher laughed when he saw that.

"Hahaha! Don't worry. It's not the high-me talking. I have a plan to get the potion. But we might need to go back to the Lionheart duchy for it. In any case, obtaining the potion isn't our priority as of now.

But as I said. Give me a detailed breakdown of everything that we have to do to execute this project. I need to see the whole picture before we start with anything."

Layla looked at Eren in the eyes and realized that he was speaking as he meant it. She sighed and nodded before responding. Her voice had gotten more serious this time.

"Eren, this project has been created after taking into account the resources that are available in this era. I have also taken your capabilities as a ranker into account before zeroing in on alternatives.

But I have my limitations too. This project also needs one vital ingredient that you won't find discussed in any of my research. That's because I couldn't find it. Or more like locate "them"."

Layla looked at Eren thoughtfully after she said this. The latter processed her words slowly. At first, he didn't get what she meant. Eventually, he put all the pieces together and concluded. He spoke in a low voice and voiced his conjecture.

"Eliza needs a vessel! Is... is that right?"

Layla smirked at Eren before nodding her head. As she sat in the chair in front of him on the other side of the desk, she expanded her conversation.

"Sometimes your genius is almost frightening.

That's right. Master Eliza needs a vessel. A fire-element female ranker who has progressed at least till D-Rank, preferably C-Rank so that her body can sustain the process.

What's more! She needs to be especially attuned to the way of fire. Only then can we use a sample from Reen's constitution as a primer to make the vessel completely compatible with my master's soul."

Eren smirked at Layla when she finished explaining. After considering what the effects of the things that the project needed would be as a whole, the vessel part was obvious.

Simbelmyne's flower was made for Eliza so that her soul would stay in harmony with the world. Any anomalies that she might have developed due to the use of abnormal means to prolong her life would get eliminated because of the herb.

Shallot's Mirror was meant to be used as a temporary abode for her vessel when she leaves her natal body willingly. The treasure would keep her soul safe till the final process was completed.

The Astral Projection Potion was not meant for Eliza. It was meant to be consumed by her newly acquired body's existing owner so that her soul would leave the body without there being any damage to it.

Finally, Eliza would make Layla use samples taken from Reen as a primer, making the soulless body compatible with Sage's soul. Eliza would be revived with a new body at the end of the project's completion.

The existing vessel owner's compatibility with the fire element and her special attunement to the element would assure that Eliza would be able to use her Enderflames with the newly acquired body. This was her ability after all. She couldn't leave it behind and let it disperse with her original body.

"Hahahahaha! Hahahahaha! Hahahahaha!"

Eren started laughing loudly when he saw the whole picture for himself. His laughter sounded downright maniacal to Layla's ears.

"That's why she didn't kill me or Reen back then.

No matter how carefully she did everything, Sage Eliza would have encountered anomalies in her new existence if she had relied solely on Reen's constitution. Although she did tell me that she had a plan B she preferred, she made it sound like she could do things either way.

But now I understand why she chose to wait instead of getting revived right then and there, killing Reen. Heh! Plan B my ass. This was your plan fucking A all along."

Layla didn't show any expressions when she saw Eren making his claim. Her blank look soon took a sharp turn as she flashed a wicked smile of her own before responding.

"Always keep your hand hidden from the other players at the table, Eren. I hope you don't mind. It wasn't personal. It was just something my master did as an assurance.

After all, she is a perfectionist.

Hehehe! You'll see her grandeur when she starts walking on the earth with a brand-new vessel."

Eren chuckled some more and looked at the smoke that he was holding between his fingers. Meeting with Eliza had traumatized him. But now he had come to realize that her dependence on him was more than he had given himself credit for. Had he known this sooner, the mental stress he had suffered and was still suffering till this point could have been lessened.

'Sage Eliza. You played well. But there will be a day when my play starts.'

Eren praised Eliza while laughing instead of feeling dejected. He had already hit rock bottom in this timeline, after experiencing nightmares. He had become immune to such insights that were intended to mock him for his breakdown. Instead, he started coming up with his own schemes.

Eliza's dependence on Eren's involvement in the Lazarus project worked both in his favour and against him. In favour, because now he could rest assured that Reen wouldn't be mortally harmed by Eliza at this point. She was only going to be used as a part of the process after all.

Reen was being experimented on by the Sage to extract the primer needed for her upcoming vessel. It was preferable for the Sage to have Reen alive in case there was an anomaly in the primer when it was applied to the vessel.

But the necessity of his involvement also held negative connotations. Eliza was willing to extend to extreme lengths to make this plan come to fruition. And she only had Reen as her bargaining chip against Eren. The butcher could imagine that Eliza wouldn't shy away from killing Reen after extracting everything from her to make a statement for him.

Chapter 496 Liberation from the Nightmares

Eren processed every detail of the Lazarus Project along with the implications it held in his head as he smoked. When he finished his smoke, the butcher felt like a buzzing noise in his head had finally been put to rest. Like he had shed a skin.

He felt like he didn't need the smoke to deal with his nightmares. In fact, he didn't feel like he would have nightmares at all.

'Don't worry. I'll not abandon you. A necessity has become a choice. That's all.'

The butcher looked at the smoke he was holding and began to speak to it. Contrary to the indications, he was perfectly sober when he said it.

He looked at Layla who was looking at him with keen interest and a mild smile plastered on her face. As he drew the last breath from him almost burned out Stellar Sativa roll, the butcher addressed her.

"It seems you couldn't find such a vessel. Aren't there any arrays or potions you can use to find the right one for your needs? Then we can worry about how to take her hostage."

Eren placed an order for breakfast through his spectral screen after he said that. He had to pay Extols to have food delivered to his place. But he was too invested in listening to the project to go out and have food at the canteen. So he decided to indulge himself by paying for his food.

Eren didn't care about the fate of the one who gets chosen as the vessel as long as it didn't come back to bite him in the ass. If sacrificing an unknown fire-element female ranker would allow him to get Reen back, he would not hesitate to kill loads of such rankers at a moment's notice.

Layla sighed and looked outside the window from her seat before commenting.

"The problem with locating a suitable vessel is that there are too many samples. There are a lot of female rankers who are up to 90% compatible with being my master's vessel. But I want that number to rise.

I can't decide because there are too many choices to choose from. So I've increased my criterion level to make sense of my aversion to choosing a vessel myself."

Eren could see that Layla was suffering from an abundance of choices. This must have been due to the adaptability of the primer derived from Reen's constitution. Having too many choices was equally stressful as having no choice at all.

"What do you want me to do then?"

Eren said while staring at the closed door of his room. He was anticipating the arrival of the food he had ordered for himself.

Layla shrugged her shoulders before replying.

"I want you to look for a compatible vessel. I know it won't be easy. But I'm too close to choosing one myself. I know I'll hesitate before and after I make up my mind about it. So it's better that you do it."

Eren had to say that Layla was extremely loyal to Eliza. He was ready to do that job for her. That way, he could control and minimize the fallout that may potentially hit him. But before he could convey his agreement, he received a prompt on his spectral screen. The man hurriedly took the food basket inside after rushing to the door.

Eren ate his breakfast at the desk - poached eggs and cinnamon rolls. The eggs used for the former cuisine were the eggs of a ranked, flying mana beast. The cinnamon rolls were mortal food that Eren had ordered as a dessert.

Eren started eating the poached eggs as he addressed Layla once again.

"Just tell me the method for finding the suitable vessel and I shall see if anyone fits our bill. We can then plan how to make her disappear without raising any alarms.

Though the D-Rank is the minimum requirement for the vessel, it is bound to create some ripples. Plus, it won't be easy for me to take down an Adept at a frontal clash even with my Sins abilities. We'll have to use shady means to make that happen."

Layla nodded her head in response to Eren. She took out a vial of potion from her storage and threw it in Eren's direction. The latter caught it easily and kept it in front of his food. He stared at the vial that had water-like colourless liquid in it while eating.

"This vial of potion will change colour when any compatible fire-element female ranker comes into your vicinity. Depending on the intensity of the red colour, the vessel will have varying degrees of compatibility. A faint-red colour would indicate the lowest compatibility while a dark blood hue will indicate close to 100 per cent compatibility.

We are aiming for the colour of the vial to be at least sangria red. When that happens, we can start planning our next move. Let's test the vial on all the fire-element rankers we have encountered or surrounded ourselves with at the time.

Who knows? We might get lucky."

Layla didn't sound too optimistic when she said this. Eren guessed that Layla was looking for a sangria red, but was being met with a palate that was lower than that.

"Lucky? Hahaha! There's no such thing as..."

Eren was about to complete his sentence when he froze in his speech. He stopped eating and recalled Layla's requirements and found out that most of them were a match for a certain ranker he had already interacted with.

"Hehe! I think I know who could be the appropriate vessel for the project. We just need to get her at the right time."

Eren chuckled before continuing to eat. He then narrowed his eyes when he thought about that person.

Layla sighed when she looked at Eren's confidence. She then braced herself before continuing.

"There is also one other requirement. We need sacrifices Eren. A lot of them. After all, my master's will start at D-Rank, depending upon the vessel's ranking status. But there is one one-time method in the project we can use to make her shoot up to her current Sage rank in one go."

Eren narrowed his eyes when he heard more people needed to die for Eliza to completely revive herself. He addressed the young witch in a low voice while staring at the colourless content of the vial that was slowly changing colour in his presence as well.

"Let there be sacrifices then."

Eren said casually.

Chapter 497 Set-up P1

The clear sky was lit with the dying lights of sunset. The winds carried the smell of something burning.

"Why... Why are you doing this to me?"

Please stop. I... I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Just leave me alone."

A young woman's pleading voice was heard in the forest not too far away from the city of Arangar. Her carriage looked like a meteor had fallen over it. There were a bunch of bodies that were lying around the carriage as well. They were wearing guard uniforms.

The guards' bodies had been partially charred. But it was apparent that there had been a few blunt traumas on or near their heads. Because their heads seemed to be squashed.

The young woman who had found herself in trouble was quite pretty. Her figure was not bodacious. But she had the right curves in the right places. She had long hair. Plus her green eyes and her petite nose made her look cute. But she soon found out that cuteness wouldn't help in times like these.

The young woman didn't manage to run far away from her carriage when tragedy fell on her from the sky. She was a Novice ranker herself. But compared to the battle prowess of her assailant, she was a nobody.

"Sorry? Sorry? Hahaha! You are saying sorry to me right now. But all I hear is that guy fucking you to his heart's content as you moan under him.

You fucking whore. You could have told me if you wanted money. I would have done everything in my power to give you the life you want. Why do you think I joined the Titus festival, risking my life?"

That was all for you. All for you damn it. But now I feel pathetic. What use is the money when I can't even keep my wife loyal to me?"

I fucking loved you, Tista. I... I... Hahaha!

I'm so angry that I want to laugh. I can't even form sentences."

A young man in his 20s was standing in front of the kneeling woman. He had only worn cargo pants for clothes. His open torso spoke volumes about his strict body routine. He had a wide chest and well-

defined abs. His muscular arms and pumped collar made him look like a veteran fighter. The muscles of his legs peeked through his pants which were torn in various places.

The young man was smiling. He chuckled from time to time. But nobody would say that he was enjoying the moment. That's because his brown eyes were filled with tears. No matter how much he wiped his tears with his hands, they would make their presence known in the next moment.

After all, the cause of his sorrows was right in front of him.

"Tuan... what... What was I supposed to do? You... you were not at home most of the time. We were broke together. Veraal was only trying to help me. We didn't know when it..."

Tuan's anger reached its peak when he heard Tista giving him lame excuses. It was true that he was not home most of the time. But this was also because of her that he had to take part in guild missions. She would often buy things that she didn't need only to throw them away when she liked them.

The couple's financial crisis was mostly caused by Tista's careless attitude. Yet Tuan never complained. He had thought that his wife would come around when they had their child together.

And now. Tuan laughed at his incompetence in not seeing the real Tista for the lying manipulating bitch she was. He was blinded by love after all.

When Tista complained to Tuan again about wanting to move to a better city away from the city of Arangar, Tuan had taken it to his heart. The city was great for adventurers and hunters alike. But it was no place to raise a family. Plus, because it was so close to the borders of the Badlands, it always carried the risk of being attacked by a monster horde.

So when the Titus tournament and its prize money were announced, it was Tista who had suggested to Tuan to take part in it and win it for her. Tuan was an experienced adventurer. He had come to the duchy of Nightshade from the duchy of Lehan during one of his missions. He stayed here after meeting Tista, falling in love with her over time.

Tuan had thrown his settled life at the duchy of Lehan to be with Tista. And now she was giving him pathetic excuses about how adultery was justified. Naturally, it angered Tuan to no end.

Tista regretted being with her lover Veraal. She had an affair with her lover on a whim, as a way to spice up her dull married life. She didn't think she would ever get caught. That's because she would make sure to schedule her rendezvous with her Veraal only when Tuan was out of the city.

But she could have never imagined that some vile creature would stalk her and leak her affair to her husband. She regretted not knowing about the person who had fucked her so royally in the ass more than her husband and her lover ever could.

"Tista... Tista... What did I do to deserve this? Did I ever mistreat you? Did I ever yell at you before today? Tell me. I want you to tell me before you die, you lying whore."

Tuan was very emotional in front of his cheating wife. He kept repeating the same thing. As if he was afraid to take the final step and kill her.

Using the private guards hired by her lover, Tista attempted to escape Tuan. She knew that even though the city of Arangar had offered her protection from her husband, he could always snap and kill her without worrying about the consequences.

That's why they had hatched a clever plan to run in disguise. But that plan came back to bite them in the rear. It was like giving Tuan the opportunity he needed to strike at them.

Veraal was not among the pile of bodies because he had managed to run away. He was an Ace too, after all. No matter what Tuan did, he couldn't take care of the guy who had cucked him in one swift move.

"Tista... I..."

Tuan was going to vent out his frustration more in front of his wife. But he heard an unknown voice interrupting him.

"My man, kill the bitch and be done with it. There's no point dragging this scene any more than it needs to. I'm short on time, you know."

Chapter 498 Set-up P2

"My man, kill the bitch and be done with it. There's no point dragging this scene any more than it needs to. I'm short on time, you know."

A shadow dressed in completely black attire appeared on an upper branch of the tree not far away from the husband and wife duo. The shadow was wearing a jacket with a hood. It was also wearing a weird yet eye-catching mask.

Tuan opened his eyes wide in surprise when he saw that shadow.

"You... it was you who had thrown that array disk at me and ran away."

Tuan pointed his finger at the shadow and said aloud. The shadow nodded at him before speaking up.

"That's right. You should be thankful that I uncovered your cheating wife in front of you.

Now kill her off and let me do my job. I wasn't planning to intervene between the two, honest. But your reluctance to get rid of that bitch is getting on my nerves."

Tuan felt angry when he heard the shadow speak. He clenched his fists and spoke in a voice that told the shadow he was controlling himself from yelling out loudly in anger.

"Listen here, stranger. I don't know why you did what you did. However, I am not grateful to you at all. I... Hahaha... you might call me a stupid fuck. But I would have preferred to remain unaware of the fact that I was being cucked.

Still, I appreciate your gesture. Now would you please fuck off from here so I can have my talk with my wife... fuck... this bitch."

Tuan said and looked at Tista again. The young woman wasn't paying attention to the conversation her husband had with the stranger. Her mind was occupied with thoughts of her survival.

Tista assumed that her last chance of saving herself from her eventual fate lay with the shadow. She looked at him and asked in a pleading voice.

"Kind sir... save... save me from my maniacal and abusing husband. He is trying to kill me for no reason. He simply wants to get rid of me so he can have my possessions.

Please save me. Please. My friend Veeral will reward you handsomely."

Tista kneeled in the shadow's direction and asked in a very convincing, damsel-in-distress voice. Her appeal would have convinced most rankers who didn't know about the whole matter. Sadly for her, this shadow was the same vile creature she had cursed a few moments ago under her breath.

"You mean this guy?"

The shadow threw something in the air. Tuan was about to react, thinking it might have been something harmful. But then he saw what the object was and froze in his tracks.

The object landed right in front of Tista. At first, she didn't understand what it was as her watery eyes clouded her vision. But then she wiped them off and saw the object clearly.

It was Veeral's decapitated head.

"Veeeraaal... No...."

Tista cried and looked at the decapitated head with fearful eyes. She started crawling away from the head as if it was about to bite him.

"Sigh! Tuan, I expected better from you. The first rule of the ambush. Don't leave any loose ends."

The shadow spoke with a bit of lament in its voice. Tuan looked at the Veeral's head keenly to confirm it was him. He took his time to confirm that it was indeed what it looked to be without any trickery. This realization made him worried about the shadow's capabilities.

It could take care of the Ace ranker in such a short time. Its speed was exceptional. Plus, it gave off an odd aura.

"Are you from the Duchy of Lehan?"

Tuan asked, wary of the shadow. The latter remained quiet for a while before responding.

"No. And I've already given you the chance to take care of your wife and be done with your revenge. If you can't make up your mind about killing your wife, don't hold me responsible for making that choice for you."

As the shadow spoke, it tucked its hands into his sleeves and rested its frame by its shoulder against the tree's trunk. It looked like it hadn't suffered anything in its battle against Veeral.

Tuan struggled in his head to come to a decision. But he ultimately couldn't kill the love of his life. He would have forgiven her if she had opted to walk out of their marriage. He would have forgiven her if making use of him was all she did. He would have also forgiven her if she had come clean to him even now. And admitted to her wrongdoings. But Tista was adamant about making it his mistake. He would never have peace of mind if he didn't take care of the mess at his hands right now.

But before Tuan could struggle mentally any more, a purple slash was released from the shadow, cutting everything in its path. Tuan was too distracted to react in time. And the fact that Tista had crawled away from him didn't help either.

Swoosh!

Tista didn't know what hit him. She died the same way her lover had. Her decapitated head fell behind her body without making much noise.

Tuan saw what had happened. He was dumbfounded as a result. He didn't know how to react at first.

Then he felt a feeling of relief wash over him. He didn't want to get joy from seeing his wife's dead visage. But for some reason, he couldn't help doing just that. And the fact that it was someone else who had killed him gave him another form of satisfaction.

"You... who are you? And what do you want?"

In response to Tuan's question, the shadow remained silent. At this point, the daylight was almost over. The shadow decides to answer Tuan's question after adjusting the pair of Shamshirs in its hand.

"Does it matter? You want to kill me too for killing your wife right? The human psyche is strange, really. It can cause people to do injustice to the same person who has helped them in their time of need.

I don't have to say anything to you, or you to me. If we are meant to fight, either way, we might as well get on with the program."

The shadow said before gesturing to Tuan to approach it by opening its arms wide.

"Come. Let me see what the semi-finalist of the Titus tournament, Tuan Aag, also known as the magnificent Flame Feathers, can really do.

Chapter 499 Helper's Helper

Flame Steps

Fire Ball

Fire Wings

Tuan Aag employed his go-to spells to battle with the unknown shadow. He didn't know what he was supposed to do with the guy. On the one hand, he had revealed his wife's adultery to him, the cause of his despair. On the other hand, he had managed to end her for good without burdening himself, making the tragedy somewhat bearable.

Yet Tuan couldn't shake the feeling that the guy hadn't done this out of the goodness of his heart. It looked like a big conspiracy was raised against him without him knowing anything about it.

Swoosh!

Tuan jumped high with his fire-element movement spell. Then he applied his fire-element spell on his weapons, tweaking the fireball spell. Lastly, he executed his signature Fire Wings to stabilize his jump while still ascending as if he was really taking a flight.

The Fire Wings would only help him glide over the air for a limited period before ultimately bringing him down. The spell didn't allow for a sustained flight. But that didn't mean it was totally useless as most fire-element rankers had thought it was.

Tuan had created a unique battle style around the Fire Wings spell— making him known as the Flame Feathers inside the Arangar's colosseum. He was using this tactic on the shadow for the fourth time now.

The night's darkness was soon swept away when the Fire Wings came to be. Soon, a human-like figure who looked like it was going to soar through the sky stopped ascending and flapped his fire wings.

Tuan located his target quickly before wrapping his body inside his wings. He then turned into a meteor-like object that rapidly approached the shadow.

Tuan was able to accelerate his meteor-like attack by modulating his Fire Wings spell and other support spells. Therefore, it was almost impossible for ordinary rankers to completely dodge him no matter how vigilant they try to be.

Alas, Tuan was met with disappointment yet again. The shadow had managed to dodge him a fifth time as well.

'How... How could this be? How fast are this guy's reflexes?'

Tuan thought as he stood up from his position on the ground. A giant crater had formed around him as a result of his meteor-like attack's impact. The shadow was standing just at the edge of the crater and looking at him with eyes devoid of any emotions.

"You ... you set this whole thing up. What's your goal?"

Tuan asked while gripping his dual swords in his hands tightly. He didn't attack in a rushed manner this time because he had come to realize that his opponent could dodge his meteor attack without breaking a sweat.

The shadow didn't take long to respond.

"If you think this is all just some big set-up to try to get you out of the Titus tournament..."

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The shadows paused and amusingly looked at Tuan. It chuckled before resuming.

"... Then you are absolutely right. Now let me show you where you are lacking."

After saying this, the shadow disappeared from its position. The next moment, a series of violent weapon clashes could be heard in the surroundings.

"Aaaaargh!"

Tuan yelled in pain when he was inflicted with another injury on his hands by his opponent. His hand felt like it was getting numb from the foreign mana that had entered the system through the wounds.

Tuan was finally brought to his knees after a battle that lasted for more than an hour. He had tried everything in his arsenal to fight the guy on an equal footing. And for a while he did. But Tuan's opponent was acting like he was there to see him fight at a close range.

The shadow kept playing defensive while prioritizing evading all the attacks thrown its way. It only attacked when it found the right opportunity to do so.

The fact that Tuan wasn't mentally in the right place didn't help him in his cause either. Normally, he would have changed his strategy and tried a different approach after realizing that the shadow was playing defensive.

But he treated this battle as a way to vent the frustration he was feeling. By the time he realized all his mistakes, he was already on his knees in a battered state. Looking at his opponent in front of him with his bloodied body and face. His cuts were already more numerous and severe than during the Titus tournament.

"I... I now understand. You want to win the Titus tournament. Or want someone else to, possibly your employer."

Tuan said while huffing as he was out of breath. He spat out the glob of blood that was blocking his windpipe and spoke again.

"If you want me to quit. I'd quit the tournament. But please... Please don't kill me. I have some things to do that I had ignored while being blinded by love. I don't want to die with regret."

Tuan said and dropped his head in submission. He knew his condition better than anyone. There was no way for him to get out of this situation other than submission.

"See? How easy it was to come to the right decision if you could just look past your emotions.

Hehe. I shouldn't be the one to preach this though. I know what it is like to be overwhelmed by the voices in your head."

He said as he stepped closer to Tuan. He raised his Shamshir and pressed it against Tuan's neck. The latter didn't feel any fear of dying. In any case, he had asked to be spared not for himself. That plea was screaming "I tried".

'Are you sure I would be able to take up another slave?'

Eren asked the voice in his head. The voice; Alephee replied promptly.

'It should have taken a long time. But your constant smoking of Stella Sativa leaves has positively impacted your soul. You simply smoked too much.

The relief you felt after realizing what the Lazarus Project was was not just a feeling. You have successfully gotten rid of Eliza's residual soul sense. It has given you the ability to add one more conventional slave mark. You can turn Tuan into one of your pawns just fine.'

Alephee concluded, bringing a smile to Eren's face.

Chapter 500 [Bonus] Hit-List

"Why were you so ready to sign a slave contract, Tuan?"

Eren asked after removing his mask and hood. Tuan had willingly signed his slave contract with Eren, giving him the assurance he needed to come out in the open in front of him.

"How... how should I address you?"

Tuan asked after gulping down the healing potion Eren had provided him. The latter shrugged his shoulders before responding.

"Just Eren would be fine."

Tuan nodded before replying.

"Well, I have some unfinished business in the duchy of Lehan. I would like to eventually move there when I'm successful and fulfil my promise to a certain someone."

Eren looked at Tuan thoughtfully before nodding. He wasn't interested in Tuan's personal life anyway.

Eren was doing a solo recon on Tuan and came across his wife's affair by accident. He couldn't have been able to target Tuan if he had stayed in the city during the tournament's season. So he hatched a plan.

The reason Eren told Tuan about his wife's affair was so that the latter could confront her. Then he tipped the wife's lover too, forcing them to make a move and flee from the city with haste.

The situation unfolded just the way Eren wanted it to. At first, Eren was planning to kill Tuan using his Sin of Wrath ability, taking all his attainments in the fire element for himself. But he changed his mind a few days ago when he saw and heard what the guy could do.

Furthermore, Alephee had informed him about his soul's status after his talk with Layla had finished. That allowed him to accept the guy as one of the rankers he could count on.

'So you have a soft spot for people who were wronged by women. Never knew you could still surprise me with your behaviour.'

This time it was Layla who said this. She was busy with her tasks inside her pendant abode as well.

Eren ignored the young witch for her witty remarks like always and addressed Tuan.

"Alright. Did the Titus tournament give you any identification tag to confirm your identity as Tuan Aag?"

Tuan nodded unhesitantly before bringing out a coin that had runic engravings. It would project his name spectrally when he imbued it with his mana. He explained the same to his new boss before adding up.

"Eren, if the prize money is of importance to you, I can participate and try to win for you anyway. Money was never my centre of gravity all my life. I only wanted it because..."

Tuan looked at the dead body of his wife that was placed not too far away from him. He felt as if a dagger had pierced his heart before the weapon got twisted inside of him. But his brain found pure joy

in seeing her dead. The fact that Eren had killed the guy who had cucked him made him look at Eren in a favouring light.

"You are only capable of reaching the semi-finals of the tournament, Tuan. You can't win it with your current skills. I'm not belittling you. I don't have complete confidence in winning the tournament. At least not easily anyway. And you've seen the difference between us firsthand.

Sigh! But yes, we could certainly use the money."

Eren said in a low-energy voice and brought out his smoke. Contrary to what Tuan thought of him, Eren was worn out by the battle too even though he didn't look like it. The fact that he had to fight and kill Tista's runaway lover also added to his exhaustion. He could only keep up and handle everything because of Layla's potions.

Eren was about to light it up with his fire-element mana. But then Tuan did it for him by executing a mini Fire Fall at the tip of his index finger.

Eren took a drag out of his smoke before adding on.

"Don't worry about the tournament. Leave it to me. You need to leave the city of Arangar and join my assistant Agatha. She is short on helping hands. Listen to her commands.

I know you wouldn't be much help with managerial work. But I want you to lessen her burden in any way you can. You'll find her here."

Eren handed Tuan an array disk that contained basic information about Agatha and the White Raven guild. With this, the butcher had gained another member for his guild as well as a helper for his helper.

"By the way, Tuan. How many Extols do you have on you?"

Tuan was taken aback by Eren's question. But he answered truthfully anyway.

"About 3000 Extols, give or take."

'With his newly acquired deep pockets, this man doesn't care about money. And he also doesn't hesitate in lending me some. I already like this guy.'

Eren thought to himself and nodded at Tuan before making his demand.

"*Cough. Give me about 2000 Extols, Tuan. I'll return them to you in a while with interest."

The butcher felt awkward asking for money from his now-henchman. But he needed it to carry his next set of plans. Plus, the fact that he was as financially broke as Sienna was from the inside didn't help him.

It wasn't in Tuan's nature to judge a person by how much money they had anyway. For better or worse, he didn't care about it as long as his daily necessities were met. In this way, he was totally anti-Eren.

Tuan handed Eren the Extols he needed along with his identity token. He then started cleaning the battle scene like the butcher had told him to. He would then head out in Agatha's direction once he was done with his current task.

Eren had left the place as soon as he was done with settling his affairs in the region. He only needed to return to the city of Arangar after two weeks, when the last round of the tournament was scheduled.

The butcher was working overtime clearing his hit list.

"Come on... why are you shy now, Jasmine?"

You told me you'd like to do it in the Badlands, didn't you? Well, we are in the Badlands darling. Danger everywhere. Hehe! Doesn't it give you a new form of high?"

Sidro Zas was trying to force his way with a cute girl that dangerously resembled Altashia by her facial features. They were in the Badlands, not far from the border. The region was less dangerous than Sid was making it out to be.

The moonlight of the full moon peeked through the dense vegetation and made its way to the ground. Sid had found a suitable spot for his "Badlands adventure" with the girl he had randomly met and instantly hit it off with.

The girl was also an Ace ranker. Although she had just broken through, her rank was enough for anyone to assume that she was capable of adventuring outside like this.

Jasmine told Sid that she wanted him to take her to the Badlands where there was a chance of monsters appearing. Sid used his army privilege and sneaked her into the region just so that he could get lucky with the girl he just met.

The girl appeared distressed at first. But if one looked carefully, they would find that she was handling him masterfully. She also looked like she was waiting for someone.

"You did a good job, Sylphie. Here's your reward."

A shadow appeared out of nowhere not far from where the duo was. Sid could not process or understand what was going on and how the shadow came so near him without him noticing. While he was at it, the same shadow threw a pouch containing 1000 Extols at the girl.

"Your work is done. Now get the fuck out."

Eren coldly said to Sylphie. Sylphie understood that it was only meant as a warning to her despite his rudeness.

"Pleasure doing business with you, kind sir."

Sylphie responded and bowed a bit to Eren. Then she returned to her gorgeous elven appearance, no longer bearing Altashia's features.

"Wait... what?"

"Bye-bye.!"

Sylphie didn't explain anything to her victim. She waved at Sidro before disappearing from her spot. The guy with the erect penis was left with the butcher who was here to kill him.

Unlike Tuan, Eren preferred killing a snake like Sid thousand times over. He wasn't willing to absolve himself from butchering his team's berserker. Some problems needed to be uprooted from their base before they fester and turn bigger.